

PROVENANCE OF THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

By

Olugbenga Olagunju

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INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Matthew is one of the most important single documents in the New Testament because it reveals the fullest account of the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of the founder of Christianity Jesus the Christ and yet it is a document that poses a number of questions which no scholars or commentators have been able to unravel with certainty. The question as to the origin of the documents? Who wrote it? Where and when was it written? Who was the author a Jew or a gentile? What is the date of its composition (s)? And to whom was it written to a Jewish Christians community or Hellenistic Christians community? All these questions are yet to be answered with conviction. As the research continues the writer wants to examine the above questions in the light of the provenance of the gospel of Matthew with particular reference to the origin of Matthew's gospel vis a vis sources and environmental influence.

THE MEANING OF PROVENANCE

Looking through various dictionaries and commentaries one discovers that provenance has to do with the origin or the source of the gospel. Provenance seeks to elucidate on the place and origin of writing and to whom was it written (McKnight 1992: 526). It also finds answers to the environmental influence that has affected the Gospel and his writer over a period of time.

PROVENANCE OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Sources

The provenance of the gospel of Matthew was first discussed by the early church fathers in the first century. Fathers like Papias, Irenaeus, Origen and Eusebius posited the

provenance of Matthew's gospel. The statement of Papias that Matthew compiled the oracles in Hebrew was taken by the early church as evidence that Matthew was the author of the gospel which had been handed down as St Matthew's gospel (Walls 749) McKnight citing *Hist. Eccl. 3.39.16* noted that the record of the statement made by Papias as to who wrote the gospel was recorded as follows that "Matthew collected (*synetaxato*) the oracles (*ta logia*) in Hebrew language (*Hebraidi dialekto*) and each interpreted (*hermeneusen*) them as best as he could" He noted that on the final analysis the tradition of Papias appears to say that the apostle wrote a Gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic and various translations were made of his work (Mcknight 1992:527)

Around third century A.D Ireneus declared that Matthew wrote his gospel among the Hebrew of the Palestine. He confirms that the first gospel was composed while Peter and Paul were founding the church at Rome (Blomberg citing *Adv Haer. 3. 1.1 from Eusebius, Hist. Eccle. 5.8.2. in the New American Commentary 38*).

A century later Eusebius taught that Matthew wrote to the Hebrews when he was on the point of going to other nations for the propagation of the gospel. By the fifth century Jerome specified that Matthew composed his gospel in Judea for the sake of those who has come to faith out of the circumcision (Blomberg 1992:38) Scholars in the nineteen and twentieth century has proposed a variety of provenance for the gospel of Matthew. People like Brandon and Osborne suggested Alexandria and Edessa respectively. Morris noted that very little can be said about the provenance of this writing. The indications that it was written for a Jewish Christian community might point to a place in Palestine and this is supported by the tradition recorded by Papias that it was written for the Hebrews. Streeter support provenance from Antioch in Syria. He noted that there was a sizable

numbers of Jews in Antioch as at the time of writing this gospel and we know from Acts that quite early there was Christians church there, a church that was very active for example in sending out missionaries like Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3). He rejected Palestinian origin based on the fact that the tradition that supports Palestine went back to Papias and was therefore unreliable. Streeter however holds to the Antioch destination because he finds some connection with Ignatius and with Didache and gave two factors that supported the choice of Antioch as the place of origin of the Matthew gospel. These are: 1. The adoption of a date after A.D. 70, by which time most Palestine was destroyed.

2. Antioch boast of a very large Jewish population and serves as a center for outreach to the Gentile world Streeter (1951:35). Scholars like Kilpatrick disagree with Streeter as to the origin of Matthew in Antioch he posit Phoenician, suggesting a place like Tyre and Sidon as the actual place of writing the gospel (Kilpatrick 1946:23). Most scholars, however, he accepts the Syrian provenance for Matthew (Mounce 1985: XIV Davies and Allison 1988: 138-47; Bloomberg 1992: 37; Schweitzer 1995:149-50) There are scholars who do not accept the Syria Antioch origin but prefer a provenance from the rural community of the Syrian axis near Galilee or Decapolis, after all Antioch had embraced the Gentile mission from the start (Carson et al 1992: 75; Guthrie 1999: 38).

Some also suggested that Matthew wrote this gospel in rural Palestine like Tiberias or the outskirts of Palestine like Syria. Viviano specific proposal is Caesarea where Jerome claimed to have seen the Hebrew original text of the gospel preserved in the library. In his article, Viviano clearly shows that the provenance for Syria as postulated by Streeter lack sufficient evidence to support its argument, he therefore argued in favor of Palestine as the most appropriate location (Viviano1979:533-546)

Keener prefer an urban center in Syro-Palestine that spoke Greek included the sizable Jewish community residentially segregated from Gentile probably remained bitter against the Romans for the recent Massacre of A.D. 66-70 and remain in touch with rising current in Judea. Keener summarizing his position noted, "But no evidence limits the provenance specifically to Antioch and whenever Matthew specific provenance, he was probably within the range of the emerging sphere of rabbinic or rabbinic like scribal influence hence probably somewhere in Syro-Palestine" (Keener 1999: 42).

Keener pitch his tent with those that align themselves with Syria as the place of origin of Matthew gospel. France beautifully rounds up the various positions of the scholars as follows:

For the understanding of the Gospel, however it makes little difference whether it was written in Palestine or Syria in Antioch or some part of the eastern Mediterranean bloc and the location is never likely to be demonstrated conclusively. What does matter is that we recognize it as written in the context of and directed to the concerns of a Christian church, many of whose members were still acutely conscious of their roots in Judaism and who needed to work out as a matter of existential importance what was the true relation of Jesus to Israel. (France 1985: 28)

WHO WROTE MATTHEW?

The other interesting aspect of Matthew's gospel is the issue of authorship who wrote the gospel of Matthew? Was the author Matthew the tax collector? On the question of authorship, it is not clear as to who wrote the gospel but the traditional belief is that the gospel was written by Matthew who bears the name. There are scholars who stand in the position that the gospel was apostolic scholars like Albright, Gundry and Carson to mention a few posit apostolic authorship of Matthew's gospel. However there are other scholars who oppose the apostolic authorship of Matthew. The argument puts forward by

those who opposed apostolic authorship of Matthew is based on the source, They argue that Matthew used Mark as his source and if Matthew uses Mark as his source then it would be that an apostle borrow from non apostolic source and this may not be acceptable but if Peter is seen as standing behind Mark as some early Christian evidence show or support this view then some level of Apostolic authority is adduced to Mark backing his writing of Mark's gospel. Another argument is that the gospel of Matthew was written in Greek and not in Aramaic or Hebrew, therefore the author could not have been the apostle Matthew (Strecker) The argument as to non Matthean authorship of the gospel has some important features because it is now clear that our present gospel is not likely an original Aramaic or Hebrew gospel because its language often betrays its Greek origin in Greek word play and its dependence on the Septuagint. Various liberal authors like Strecker have no reason to follow the traditional view of attributing the author of Matthew gospel to the apostle; he sees a Gentile or an Hellenistic author.

Environmental Milieu of the Gospel of Matthew

There are some scenes in the gospel of Matthew that tempted most scholars to believe that the gospel of Matthew is influenced by the Hellenistic milieu of his time. Although traditional scholars such as J. Chapman, B.C. Butler and W. R. Farmer maintains the Jewishness of the document and that it is the earliest of the gospel written and canonized (Green 2000:21) Other argument puts forward is that Matthew emphasizes the fulfillment of the law and also refers to such Jewish matter as the temple tax (Matt. 17:24) and phylacteries Matt. 23:5. He also talks about the validity of the law Matt. 5:18-19 and says that the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees should be followed (Matt. 23:2-3) (Bridge

1996:66). However modern scholars and those from the liberal school of thought opposed to the traditional believe that thumb up for Matthew as the author and that the environment which he found himself is Hellenistic

Manus posit several reasons to support Gentile or Hellenistic milieu of Matthew's Gospel. He said looking at the Matthew Gospel there are certain indications that Matthew's Gospel derives immediately from the Hellenistic and not a Jewish environment;

A. The Universalism of the Gospel. This is seeing in Matthew 2:1-12; 4:14-16; 12:21; 28:19. The Universalistic view of Matthean gospel is striking. In Mt 28:19 the Gospel read "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations." The writer sees the gospel as an instrument that will touch the life of everyone living in the world. Apart from this the disciples also are to be the salt and the light of the world.

Mt 10:5-6

"Jesus sent out twelve charging them saying go nowhere among the gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"

Manus citing the explanation of W. Trilling as to reconcile the above quoted scriptures with Mt. 28:19 say Jesus was sent only to the Jews. They, however, did not accept him as their Messiah. And therefore he commissioned them to evangelize the Gentiles This is the same sequence we find in Paul's preaching. He first approaches the Jews only after their refusal of the gospel he turn to the Gentiles. It should be noted that motif of

condemnation of the Jewish nation is also noticed in Matthew's gospel which made some scholars to believe in its Hellenistic outlook.

- B. The motif of torturing in Matthew Gospel this is found in Mt. 18:34 which is not a Jewish practices seeing Matthew as the author of the gospel.
- C. The so called misunderstood Hebrew Parallelism of Mt. 21: 5-7 and various other non Jewish feature
- D. Absence of Jewish versus Gentile Tension Mt 15:10-11
- E. Language use is more modern in Matthew than in Mark which points to a Gentile influence
- F. The Christology in Matthew is more Hellenistic in its construct than Jewish-Christian Christology. Manus posit four ways by which Christology in Matthew reflects Hellenistic Christological view
 - a. In its conclusion in Mt. 28:16-20 where the notion of an exalted Jesus was portrayed rather than the notion of the resurrection which is a typically Jewish-Christian pattern of Christology
 - b. This exaltation Christology depends on motifs from the cult of the Emperor and from wisdom Literature and it projects a Jesus who has authority, who is worshipped and who commands
 - c. Jesus sends his disciples to all the nations where as Jewish apocalyptic thought is that all nations would come to Jerusalem.
 - d. The use of *Kurios* in Matthew depicts Hellenistic view of a monarch to be worship. This is a picture of the exalted Jesus. This picture is seen throughout the Matthean Gospel.

e. The use of wisdom motif also show that his Christology is more Hellenistic see Mt. 23:37-39

f. The Christological titles in Matthew are more Hellenistic quoting Kingsbury Manus said

That the title is central to Matthew's gospel. It is a title which lends itself to a more Gentile/Hellenistic interpretation of the event in the gospel of Matthew.

g. The ethics of Matthew's gospel is more Halakah in nature. Manus citing Stendhal suggests that the setting of Matthew is Hellenistic in nature and the gospel probably comes from the scribal school tradition (Manus 26:2007)

Other argument against the Matthean provenance of the Gospel has to do with the date of writing. Majority of liberal scholars hypothesize Matthew's dependence on Mark for his information and if this is so then since Mark was written between A. D. 65-68 before the fall of Jerusalem then Matthew would have the date of between A. D.75-85 scholars such as Strecker, Allison, Grundman are cited as supporting this view (see McKnight:1992)

From the above positions one still precludes that the traditional position still hold even though it is fraught with different problems. If the writing of the gospel is dated back to after the fall of Jerusalem it is unlikely that the author is the apostle and if probably the Matthew used mark then it is at best peculiar that Matthew would have recorded his conversion by coping mark. The point is that Matthew

gospel may not have been written by one of the disciple of Jesus and not even a first generation Christian (Manus 27: 2007).

CONCLUSION

The early church father did not consider the issue of provenance as an issue because it has nothing to do with the cannon or with the interpretation of the gospel for the benefit of the early church. The issue of provenance is an historical issue which scholars have shed some illuminating light upon, yet the job is not concluded.

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Author : Olugbenga Olagunju is a lecturer in New Testament at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho. He holds Masters of Divinity in Theology from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Louisville, Kentucky in 1995 and Masters of Theology in New Testament languages and Literature from the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho and Doctor of Philosophy degree in New Testament from the University of Jos in 2010.